PITTA

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DECCAN BIRDERS EVENTS

In light of the Corona virus (COVID-19) epidemic and relevant guidelines that have been issued, all Deccan Birders Field Trips and Indoor Meetings are on hold until further notice. Details of upcoming activities will be communicated once the situation improves.

NATURE WATCHING IN THE CARIBBEAN
Trip Report: Sint Maarten, December 2018-January 2019

Text: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri; Photos: Anwesha & Dr Barnali Chaudhuri

A view of Pinal Island, Sint Maarten

With an area of only 34 square miles, Sint Maarten is one of the smallest Caribbean islands, barely securing a tiny dot on the map of the north-eastern Caribbean Sea. It has been labelled a tropical paradise because of its beautiful weather and breath-taking landscape. This tiny island is jointly governed by France and Netherlands. The French sector is spelled Saint-Martin while the Dutch side is spelled Sint Maarten. This particular island is exceptional in its blend of Caribbean island culture infused with European charm. It is well-known for its 37 pristine beaches, each with its own distinctive nature. I was very excited to visit Sint Maarten as I would be able to experience two different European countries in just one vacation! I could experience the unique culture of the Caribbean set in a French/Dutch aesthetic.

My husband and I had decided to visit our daughter Anwesha during Christmas 2018. She is an M.D. student at the American University of Caribbean (AUC) in Sint Maarten. We started from Kolkata. After 43 long hours of journey stretching between Dubai, Milan and JFK, we finally reached Princess Juliana Airport in Sint Maarten. After passing through immigration, we were welcomed by four Brown Pelican statues at the entrance/exit of the airport. I later found out that the Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) is the national bird of Saint Maarten.

Brown Pelican statue

We reached our destination, Lagoon View apartments, by a local taxi. The apartment complex was aptly named: we could see a beautiful lagoon from my daughter's apartment. Our friends Ritta and Rahul were to join us from USA a few days later.

View from the apartment

Despite being an urbanized island whose economy depends primarily on tourism, it provides a safe haven to myriad endemic flora and fauna. The mangrove forests, rocky islets and dense wetlands harbour an incredible variety of bird species, making this volcanic landscape a birdwatcher's paradise. My daughter's apartment on the second floor overlooked a patch of rugged wilderness, making it a perfect perch for me to watch birds to my heart's content. We would come across new species of birds and iguanas every day during our twenty-day stay on the island. My only regret was that I was unable to spot hummingbirds on the island. Hummingbirds had not entirely returned to the island since the Category 5 hurricane, Irma, had destroyed it and left it in shambles in September 2017.

Carib Grackle female

Carib Grackle male

Most of the birds were lifers for me. Carib Grackles (*Quiscalus lugubris*) in Sint Maarten are as abundant as House Crows in India. These social birds are smaller in size than House Crows, though. The male Carib Grackle is a shiny black bird with bright yellow eyes, while the female is brown. I spotted a nest where some chicks were hiding behind their mother. Strikingly, the male, female and chicks have different song registers.

Zenaida Dove

I spotted a Zenaida Dove (*Zenaida aurita*). It was orangish-brown in colour. A hen was teaching its chicks how to dig for food from the ground. Eurasian Collared Doves (*Streptopelia decaocto*), locally known as Barbie Doves, flew from one tree to another, playfully chasing each other.

Eurasian Collared Dove

One of my most startling discoveries was finding iguanas. As I looked into the foliage for birds, all of a sudden, I saw something green fall from a tree, only to discover that a huge iguana was moving in the ground. A quick scan of the ground yielded 4 more of the kind, each a different species of iguana – ranging from bright sap green to a heavily muted ashy brown. It didn't take me long to realize that I had come upon their regular sun-bathing/hangout spot.

Iguanas basking in the sun

Common Buckeye

On our first day, we rented a car for transport, as we wanted to explore Sint Maarten's Butterfly Park. After forty minutes of driving and a few questionable turns, we ended up at a lonely beach. It was serene, with perfectly white and sticky sand.

Happy Beach

The tides had brought a whole crop of red algae onto the beach and this contrasted beautifully against the white sand. I would later realize that by a happy accident, we had landed at Happy Beach. The Butterfly Park had once stood tall near this beach, but it was no more. Like much of the island, it too had fallen prey to Irma. Another group of tourists also ended up at Happy Beach in search of the park. However, they chose not to stay on at the beach.

My husband spotted a pair of Brown Pelicans sitting on an abandoned boat tied to a pole in the ocean. After a while one of them flew and dived into the sea to catch fish. It was an excellent view. Unlike some other seabirds, they dive directly into the water rather than hover at the surface. Owing to its excellent eyesight, it can spot fish from a height of 20 meters! We spotted two other Brown Pelicans diving into the sea to catch fish. It was a treat to watch these majestic birds at work.

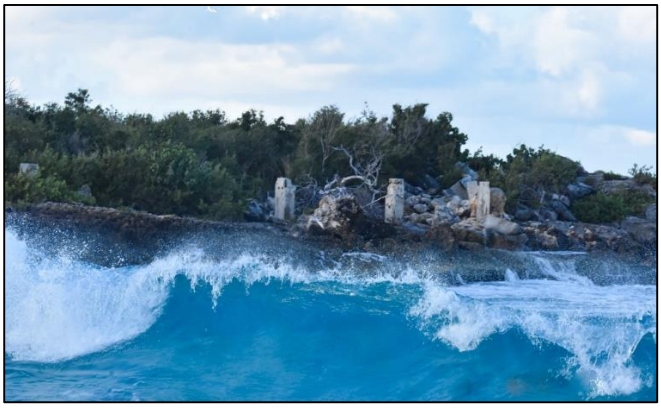
Great Blue Heron

My daughter had noticed a creek on the way to the beach, so we stopped to check it out. There, we spotted a Great Blue Heron (*Ardea Herodias*), a Great Egret (*Ardea alba*), a Grey Kingbird (*Tyrannus dominicensis*) and a few Brown Crabs (*Cancer pagurus*).

Grey Kingbird

St Andrew's Cotton Stainer

I noticed an aggregation of St. Andrew's Cotton Stainer (*Dysdercus andreae*). They are red bugs that feed on the half-opened cotton balls and seeds. In addition, adults of this species produce an indelible yellow dye that stains cotton lint, hence earning its name.



A scene at Mullet Bay

We walked to Mullet Bay one fine morning, which was only a ten-minute walk from my daughter's apartment. We had to walk through a golf course with 18 golf holes to reach Mullet Beach. In the early morning, we enjoyed the unpolluted air while crossing the golf course, which was separated from the beach by a mid-sized sand dune. The beach was devoid of any human presence in the wee hours of the morning. However, several Ruddy Turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*) were feasting in the fine sand, running around like they were participating in the Avian Olympics Marathon!

Ruddy Turnstone

The Atlantic Ocean in the Caribbean is a spectacular shade of blue. As the sun shone higher in the sky, the beach became progressively crowded with people. A young boy called to everybody's attention a baby Hammerhead Shark which had seemingly become isolated in the sea-shore muddle. Everybody was busy taking photographs of the lost creature, while we could not because we had left our phones at home for our day out in the beach. An older gentleman guided the gentle youngling to deeper water, and after a while with a big wave, we bade it goodbye.

Maho Beach is famous for planes landing just meters above the sandy beach to the Princess Juliana International Airport. Most planes land from the ocean onto the runway and take off towards the mountains on the opposite side. Undoubtedly, it makes for a brilliant photo-op, and everyone on the beach was busy clicking away, trying to get their classic Maho shot.

Plane landing over Maho Beach

We all were astonished when one plane took off towards the sea. If one were to stand behind the plane while it was taking off, one would feel the intense speed of the wind, which would be very hard to control. It would create ripples in the ocean. We also saw many *Navishankh*, also known as *Gomti Chakra*, at Maho beach. The *Gomti chakra* is the operculum of a kind of rare sea snail in the family Turbinidae.

A view of the Caribbean Sea from Maho Beach

Brown Booby

Before we knew it, the sun was setting. The Brown Booby (*Sulidae leucogaster*), a large seabird, and a Brown Pelican were fishing out in the sea. After enjoying the sunset, we went to the adjacent Sunset Bar restaurant on Maho beach for snacks. While eating we saw the Carnival cruise ship sailing through the sea. It looked like as if the ship had donned the jewellery of lights. The ambience was beautiful – the restaurant was built on a pier, and we could hear and feel the waves crash onto ragged rocks underneath the wooden flooring. The seemingly endless darkness of the ocean was cut by a distant light that, we assumed, belonged to a lighthouse.

Anwesha took us to her favourite French bakery, La Sucriere Pastry, for breakfast at Philipsburg, the Dutch capital of Sint Maarten. I had never imagined we would be able to do some birding in the patio of the restaurant itself. With a fantastic view of the Simpson Bay Lagoon cutting through mountains in the background, breakfast turned into a perfect opportunity to do some birding. We sat at their rear outdoor patio. Food was good and fresh. A Zenaida Dove was in front of us, asking for food, and there were Carib Grackles everywhere.

Magnificent Frigatebird

A male Magnificent Frigatebird (*Fregata magnificens*) was flying high in the sky, as recognized by its red gular sac. I was amazed to know that the Frigatebird has the largest wingspan (7.5 feet) of all birds compared to the body size. It can fly effortlessly for an entire week by taking naps in the air. But it does not have waterproof feathers. It must depend on food from the water surface and by stealing food from other birds. Hence Frigatebirds are also named 'man o'war'. Locally, this bird is called the Scissorbird because its tail looks like scissors while flying. Royal Terns (*Sterna maxima*) were circling the lagoon far away. The striking orange-red beak was beautiful. We even spotted two iguanas, brown and green, which came onto the patio where we were enjoying our breakfast, in search of food.

Iguana looking for food scraps

Inside Porto Cupecoy Marina

Our favourite spot on the trip was Porto Cupecoy Marina. There are several restaurants inside the Marina and shops in the peripheral area. A few of the restaurants offer live music every day. We tried out many restaurants: Rendezvouz, GongFu Tea, Mama's.

House Sparrow

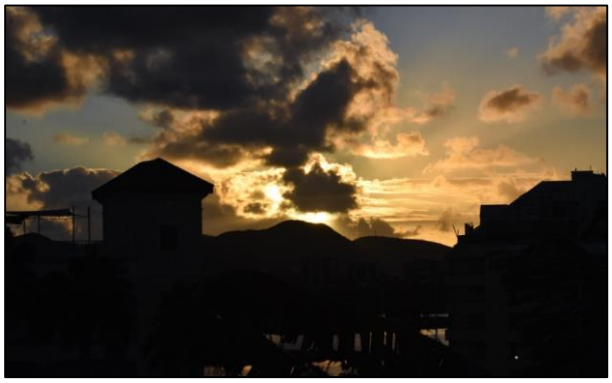
We saw a few House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) and a Bananaquit (*Coereba flaveola)* in the premises. Bananaquits are also called Sucriere or Sugar Bird locally due to their love for sugar. And, true to its reputation, it was enjoying the left-over chocolate at Porto Cupecoy Marina.

Bananaquit

Yellow-crowned Night Heron

Anwesha had discovered the preferred roosting place of a Yellow-crowned Night Heron (*Nyctanassa violacea*) near a water body inside the AUC campus. We attempted to look for it on multiple nights but failed each time. To our surprise, one night, Rahul spotted the Yellow-crowned Night Heron searching of food just behind our apartment. It looked elegant, with its colourful yellow-tan crown that extends behind its head and a white band below the eye. Its large red eyes were glittering in the night. We also saw a Banana Spider there.

Banana Spider



Sunset at AUC campus

A scene at Pinal Island

Pinal Island is a tiny island located off the North Shore on the French side. We wanted to explore it on Christmas day. We had to take a ferry that departed from the Cul-de-Sac Port. As our speed boat zoomed through the blue waters, everybody enjoyed the ride. Pinel Island was chock full of Hermit Crabs. Each one had a different coloured shell of varying sizes. We stayed there for 45 minutes and sailed back to Sint Maarten.

Caribbean Hermit Crab

Following that, we went to Porto Cupecoy Family Beach to see the sunset. It was remarkable. It justified why Sint Maarten is also known for the golden sun. The stunning beauty of Caribbean sunsets mesmerized us.

Sunset at Family Beach, Porto Cupecoy

It was a rocky beach, and we saw cotton flowers, tamarind trees and shoe flowers. Our Christmas dinner was scheduled at Mama's, an Italian restaurant at Porto Cupecoy Marina. The restaurant was totally full, and there was a beautifully decorated Christmas tree. We relished the traditional Italian food with live music.

Statue of fisherman at Simpson Bay Marina

Simpson Bay is a very popular area, buzzing with business and marinas. Tourists come here to see the fisherman's statue right outside the main Marina. The Simpson Bay Bridge is a swing bridge which allows vessels in and out of Simpson Bay and the open sea. This is the only place on the island which has traffic lights – otherwise, traffic is normally controlled by roundabouts. Monuments depicting historical or memorable incidents were displayed on most of the roundabouts. One of the most famous roundabouts has the Salt Pickers display. It is a group of bronze sculptures depicting the lives of slaves engaged in the various aspects of salt harvesting. It is a memorial dedicated to all the people who were exploited, and acknowledges the country's history, however painful it may have been.

Coal Bay

Bell's Lookout Point

There is a flag pole at Bell's Lookout Point on Coal Bay Hill. It houses a huge St Maarten's flag. It was a bit of a trek to the Lookout Point, but it was worth the climb just to see the vast ocean from the cliff on which the flag is hoisted. The serene aqua blue colour of the ocean was soothing to the eyes. I was amazed to see that the national bird of Sint Maarten has a place in their flag too!

Ritta had planned a long drive around the entire island that would last a whole day. After breakfast we started early in the morning. The roads were very hilly taking us through crests and troughs of different mountains on the island. We were cruising through the coastal roads when Anwesha spotted an Orange Iguana in a field of thorny bushes off the road. We stopped to take a few pictures, but suddenly it began to pour. Visibility had become poor, and we had to stop for safety. We took shelter in a French restaurant named Oasis for lunch. After lunch the sky cleared up, and we were ready to embark upon the last leg of our long drive. We caught glimpses of both Dutch and French localities. The ride was memorable.

Boardwalk shopping at Philipsburg

Philipsburg is the capital of the island state. It is particularly famous for its boardwalk – a giant, lively market on the beachside that is especially known for precious gems. We parked our car alongside the Great Salt Pond and walked to the boardwalk along Great Bay beach. We spotted a few Brown Pelicans hovering over the Great Salt Pond. People were enjoying water sports like parasailing, paragliding, and speedboats.

Parasailing at the beach

Cruise terminal at Philipsburg

Three cruise ships were anchored nearby at the cruise terminal. People were queuing up to get back onboard the ships. Street performers were dancing the hip hop and breakdance on the streets. There was a wonderful collection of restaurants, souvenir shops and jewellery shops along the boardwalk beach. We enjoyed the ocean view under the scorching heat of the sun while walking on the boardwalk. I secretly wondered why there was a statue of a cow that was kept alone on the beach.

Statue of cow at Great Bay Beach

The first church of Sint Maarten stands there with the statue of St Martin of Tours, who was a fourth-century Roman soldier. He had left the army to become a monk and was later acclaimed as Bishop of Tours in France. This Caribbean island was named after St Martin by Christopher Columbus.

I wanted to explore the bus service on the island. Fort Louis at Marigot was our target. I was surprised that the term 'bus' was being used fairly loosely on the island – 10-seater vans were masquerading as buses. The number plate itself was the only indication that it was a bus (BUS92)!

The bus stop was five minutes' walk from our apartment. We had to take a couple of buses, stopping at the local KFC to board a bus to Marigot.

A view of Marigot Port

From Marigot, we trekked to Fort Louis. It was a very nice place. The weather was also on our side – it was a clear, windy and a sunny day. A huge cross welcomed us onto the fort's grounds. Beyond that statue, a staircase began that would ultimately get us into the fort itself. Hence there was no problem climbing.

Cannon at Fort Louis, Marigot

The fort was completely in ruins. There were several cannons placed on top of the fort, facing every direction.

Torn French flag

On the tallest surviving tower of the fort flew a French flag. The flag had been torn by strong wind. It was surprising that the flag had not been taken down and replaced.

We enjoyed the 360-degree views from the top of the hill. We noticed a big tree trunk full of thorns. While returning, Anwesha spotted an American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) sitting on a tree. The American Kestrel is a small falcon, and it is probably the only raptor breeding on the island. Local people called it *killy-killy*.

Green Iguana

We spotted many iguanas scattered through the thorny terrain. A pair of Black-faced Grassquit (*Melanospiza bicolor*) was playing in the nearby bushes. The winds were so strong that tall grasses bent to its will and touched the ground, as if they were bowing to Mother Nature. The sun was about to set, and it was the time to return.

An island off Guana Bay

Geneva Beach is the best beach if one wants to connect to nature in solitude and enjoy a crowd-free adventure. After hurdling through the steep hilly roads leading up to the cliff where the trail started, we finally reached Guana Bay. As expected, it was deserted. An abandoned and destroyed house stood eerily on the top of the cliff, serving as a ghostly reminder of the devastating effects of Hurricane Irma. A pair of mountain goats was grazing on the tough grass that grew haphazardly on the rocky cliffs. Their appearance was quite different from normal goats.

Mountain Goat male

Mountain Goat female

We listened to the roar of the waves aggressively crashing into the rocks over and over again. As I looked over the cliff, I could see about 100 feet down. The unruly yet coordinated waves of Guana Bay had eroded through the hilly structure to create a steep, sharp and vertical overhanging of rocks. The white froth against the Prussian blue sea waves seemed to be forming V-shapes as they rushed towards the cliff. "This could be a big advertisement for surf", Anwesha felt.

Some views of Guana Bay

It was a beautiful sunny day. We started our trek on a very narrow hilly road. We took lots of pictures – the ambience was ideal for a photoshoot. A really narrow trail road opened into a mid-sized grassy field. On one end was a hill and the other end was a steep cliff opening into the ocean. Here we saw a pair of Common Ground Doves (*Columbina passerina*) foraging for food. They were much smaller than the other doves.

Common Ground Dove

We were surrounded by different species of cacti of all shapes and sizes. We also saw a lot of lizards, as they ran from one rock to another. There were many iguanas as well. A few hundred feet out into the ocean, there were giant offshore rocks and islets that are relatively inaccessible to humans, making them important nesting areas for seabirds.

American Kestrel pair

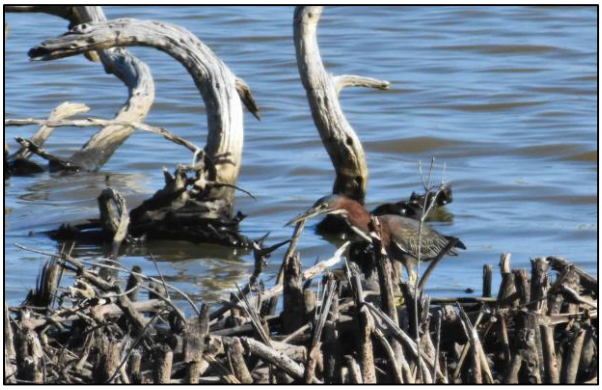
Anwesha spotted a pair of American Kestrel sitting on top of some giant boulders on the hilltop. The male and female were taking turns to hunt – we had chanced upon a fantastic opportunity to observe hunting behaviour in these relatively tiny predators. We saw one of them staying still in the air without seemingly moving its wings, before it dived straight towards the ground to hunt a small lizard. As we were watching this magnificent hunting technique, we spotted three Brown Pelicans flying right over our heads.

The Baie Rouge Beach is also known as Red Bay Beach due to its red sand. I was excited to explore it and see the red sand, but was disappointed as the sand was the normal sandy colour and not red! However, there were red rocks on the beach. Despite the disappointment, the beach was really beautiful.

On the last day of our stay at Sint Maarten, we wanted to walk to the Rouge Pond which was on the French side. After we crossed Porto Cupecoy Marina, an uphill climb began. The name Cupecoy means Lowlands. Porto Cupecoy abuts the French Saint-Martin and Dutch Sint Maarten border.

Border between French and Dutch regions of Sint Maarten

We crossed the border where the flags of both the countries were hoisted together with no place for no man's land. It signifies and justifies the other name of Sint Maarten as 'The Friendly Island'. We had crossed this border several times by car. But we would have missed a lot if we had not taken this walk. The houses were different from the Dutch side. During our walk, we came across Bananaquit (*Coereba flaveola*), American Kestrel, Gray Kingbird (*Tyrannus dominicensis*), and Eurasian Bullfinch (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*). Locally, the Grey Kingbird is also known as the *chincherry*.



Green Heron

Black-necked Stilt

It took us more than one hour to reach Rouge Pond, which is a protected area. We saw several water birds as was expected. The southeast part of the pond is almost a mudflat where Anwesha spotted a Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*). It was perfectly camouflaged in the surroundings. A few Black-necked Stilts (*Himantopus mexicanus*) were busy picking food. A Greater Yellowlegs (*Tringa melanoleuca*) was looking for food. We also saw numerous crabs in the mudflat.

Greater Yellowlegs

We continued northward on the same road and peeped through the thin layers of Mangroves, literally functioning as a bird hide. It separated the pond from the busy main road. I recognized an Orange-horned Tarantula Hawk (*Pepsis ruficornis*), a species of Spider Wasp, by its vivid blue colour and orange horn. Interestingly, the female Tarantula Hawk paralyzes a tarantula and drags it to its pre-dug burrow as living food, lays a single egg on the belly of the paralyzed tarantula, and leaves after covering the den's entrance. On hatching, the larva digs a hole into the abdomen and feeds on the flesh of the still-living tarantula.

Orange-horned Tarantula Hawk

An adult Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*) was seen roosting on the other side of the pond.

Several Brown Pelicans were roosting on small dead trees sticking out of the middle of the pond. A few others were fishing. Adult Brown Pelicans have a white head and neck, although the top of the head may be yellowish or tan. We enjoyed watching their fishing practices.

Brown Pelican

The Brown Pelican is the only member of the pelican family that catches its prey by plunge diving, with its long broad wings partly folded. I was amazed to see the large skin pouch under its long grey bill. The pouch can hold two to three times as much food as its stomach and it serves as a net to catch fish also. It was magnificent to see that some of them were diving head first.

By the 1970s the Brown Pelicans were on the endangered species list. The populations of Brown Pelicans increased again after DDT was banned. In 2009, Brown Pelicans were removed from the endangered list, a successful conservation story.

The most unique aspect of this trip was experiencing the Caribbean culture in a European backdrop. All the pristine beaches of Sint Maartin were so clean – this not only demonstrates an environmental awareness amongst the locals, but also a healthy attitude towards nature among tourists. I loved watching the planes land over our heads at Maho beach. Our trek to the Red Pond was memorable as we saw innumerable Brown Pelicans in their habitat. I was amazed to know the successful conservation story of the once endangered Brown Pelicans. If it weren't for the 43-hour journey to the island, I'd love to go back there at the drop of a hat!

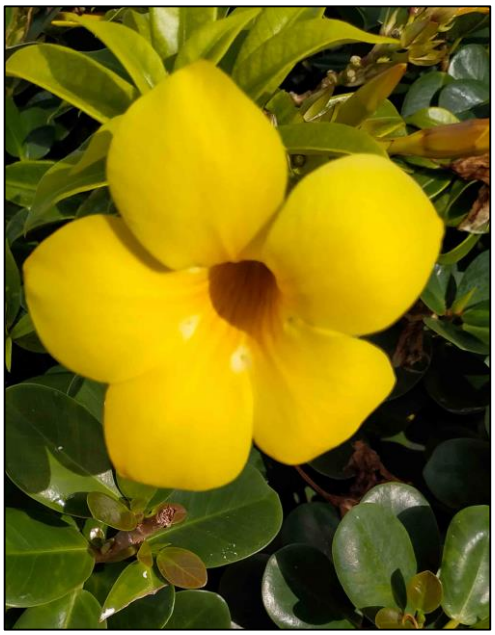
I would like to thank my daughter Anwesha – she not only made it possible to take in some great birding there, but also contributed her pictures and other inputs to this article.

View of island from the plane

Some other photos taken during the trip:

Firecracker (*Russelia equisetiformis*)

Hydrangea



Alamanda

Lesser Antillean Bullfinch

Brown Pelican

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Bird of the Month

Text and Photo: Umesh Mani

Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*)

Ruff (Kakinada, January 7, 2019)

Order: Charadriiformes
Family: Scolopacidae
Genus: *Philomachus*
Species: *P. pugnax*
Size: Male 26-32 cm, Female 20-25 cm

Description & distribution: The Ruff is a medium-sized wader that breeds in northern Eurasia, and winters in southern and western Europe, Africa, southern Asia and Australia. In our region, the Ruff is seen across India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. It is one of the few species where the female is also known by a different name, the Reeve. It is a distinctive bird, with a small head, long neck, relatively short sandpiper-like bill and a pot-bellied body. Legs can be variable in colour but are usually yellow or orange. In flight, it shows an indistinct white wing bar and white patches on the sides of the tail base. The Ruff shows sexual dimorphism, with some clear differentiating features between male and female. The male is around 6-7cm bigger on average than the female. During breeding season, the male shows bright orange on the legs, bill and the bare facial skin, and has distinctive head tufts and a neck ruff, which can be of different colours – black, chestnut or white – and with variable colouring – solid, barred or irregular. The back is grey-brown with black or chestnut feathering and a scaly appearance, and the underparts are black with a black breast. It is believed that the extreme variations in breeding plumage have evolved to help in individual recognition in a species that demonstrates communal breeding displays. In the non-breeding season, which is the plumage we usually see in India, the male becomes plainer – the legs and bill become dull orange, the head and neck ornaments and facial colour are lost, and the upperparts become dull grey-brown. The underparts are still white, but the breast and flaks show grey mottling. The female, or the Reeve, in breeding plumage, shows grey-brown upperparts with feathers having white fringes and dark centres. The breast and flanks have variable black blotches. In non-breeding season, the female is similar to the male, but can be told apart by the smaller size. Juvenile birds are similar to the non-breeding adult male, but the underparts show a strong buff tinge, and the upperparts have a neat, scale-like appearance with dark-centred feathers.

Habitat & behaviour: The Ruff is gregarious and is usually seen in medium to large flocks on marshes and tidal mudflats, often along with other waders like Sandpipers, Redshanks, etc. Its behavior is generally similar to other waders, with the bird tending to stay on mudflats and marshes, or on the sides of water bodies like creeks, lakes, saltpans, lagoons and estuaries. The Ruff is known for its promiscuous breeding habits – the females are also polyandrous – and elaborate courtship displays. In breeding season, the males in varying plumages tend to gather communally at selected open grassy spots known as ‘leks’ or ‘hills’; females, however, seem to prefer larger leks taller plants nearby, which offer better nesting habitat. In the leks, individuals often occupy adjacent territories of barely a few square inches, and posture threateningly towards other males by puffing up their ruffs and ear tufts, flexing their legs, lowering their heads with bills pointed upwards, and sometimes leaping at each other. Female birds that are ready to breed visit the leks from time to time, and mate with the male of their choice. Mating may also occur with the male actively ursuing the female outside a lek, or waiting to intercept her near good feeding areas. Thereafter, the nesting duties are handled by the female, with the male taking no part. As a result, the males also leave the breeding grounds earlier – in late June or early July – and are followed later in July by the females and juveniles.

The Ruff is usually silent, even while displaying, although it does occasionally emit a soft *gue gue gue* call, or a soft *tu whit* when flushed. During breeding, its diet consists almost exclusively of adults and larva of terrestrial and aquatic insects like beetles and flies. Outside breeding season, its diet includes insects (like caddis flies, water-beetles, grasshoppers, mayflies), crustaceans, spiders, mollucks, worms, frogs and small fish, as well as aquatic plants, sedges, grasses and the seeds of rice or other cereals.

Nesting: The Ruff breeds generally between early March and early June in its breeding grounds, with some variations based on latitude. The nest is a shallow scrape in the ground, lined with grass leaves and stems, and hidden in between tall marsh plants close to the lek. Nesting is solitary, although there may be several nests in the same general vicinity. The usual clutch consists of 4 buff-coloured eggs with brown splotches.

Local name: The Ruff is known as *'Gehwala'* or *'Bagbad'* in Hindi, *'Geowala'* in Bengali, *'Ruffreev'* in Punjabi, *'Galabandh panlawa'* or *'Gherbala'* in Marathi, *'Vara cheravi'* in Tamil, and *'Bahuvarnan manaloothi'* in Malayalam.

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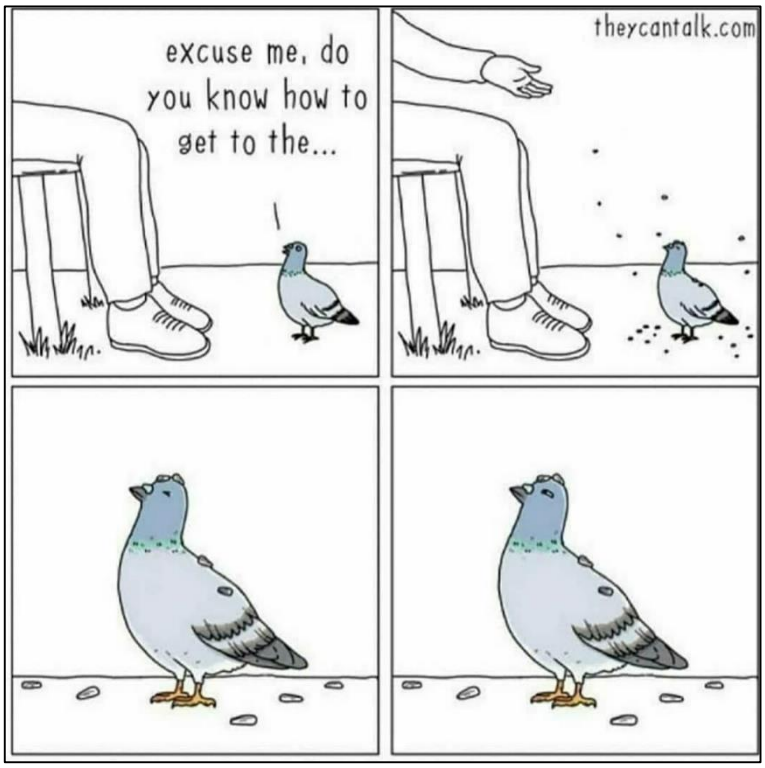
Bird Humour

Umesh Mani



(Received on Whatsapp, March 23, 2021)

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